

REVIEW: *HOME AT THE SOURCE OF THREE RIVERS*

Reviewed by Nyangchakja (Snying lcags rgyal

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Qinghai sheng lin ye xiang mu ban gong shi 青海省林业项目办公室



[Qinghai Provincial Forestry Project Office].

2017. *Gtsang gsum 'go khungs kyi sbra khyim*

གཙང་གུམ་ཀོ་ཁུངས་ཀྱི་སྤྱོད་ཀྱི། *Wo jiazhu zai sanjiang*

yuan 我家住在三江源 [*My Home at the Source*

of Three Rivers].² Beijing 北京: Renmin jiaoyu

chubanshe 人民教育出版社 [People's

Education Press]. 93 pp. ISBN 978-7-107-

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Established in 2000, The Three Rivers Source

National Nature Reserve (hereafter TRSNNR) comprises 152,300 square kilometers of the general region of Three Rivers' Source, which encompasses 363,000 square kilometers in the south of Qinghai Province (SNNR 2018). "The Three Rivers" refer to the Yangtze (Changjiang), Yellow, and Lancang (Mekong).³ The region of the Three Rivers' Source, which has an area greater than that of Germany, has the country's highest altitude wetlands and supports globally important biodiversity. Known as "China's Water Tower," the area has key ecological value for China and our world.

Global warming and glacial melting have direct impact on the wetlands, lakes, wildlife, and the entire ecosystem in the TRSNNR,

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² Sanjiang yuan = Chinese Pinyin. "Source of Three Rivers" and "Three Rivers' Source" are used interchangeably in this review.

³ The Yangtze River is the longest river in the country, reaching the East China Sea after flowing through eleven provinces, regions, and cities. The Yellow River is the second longest river in the country, while the Lancang (Mekong) leaves China, flowing through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

which is China's second largest nature reserve.¹ Rare wildlife protected in the nature reserve include snow leopards, Tibetan antelopes, wild yaks, wild ass, and black-necked cranes.

Mining, logging, fishing, and hunting were prohibited in TRSNRR in June 2017 during a trial regulation period (Xinhuashe 2017) and in January 2018, China announced its plan for the completion of a Three Rivers' Source National Park by 2020 (NDRC 2018), further emphasizing the importance given to this region by the central government.

Home at The Source of Three Rivers is divided into three parts: My Home the Three Rivers' Source, Spirits Around Us, and Nature and Us, that collectively (including the preface) feature twenty sparsely illustrated stories featuring sacred mountains and lakes, wetlands, the weather, plants, caterpillar fungus, forests, antelopes, snow leopards, black-necked cranes, brown bears, problems with garbage, black tents, and yaks.

Written in simplified Chinese, the text begins with a story and ends with a postscript. The latter notes that the Global Environment Facility (GEF),² the Qinghai Provincial Forestry Bureau, and the United Nations Development Programme as part of the Qinghai Three Rivers' Source Biodiversity Protection Project, all played a role in this book project. The reader is further informed that in order to achieve the goal of raising public awareness of ecological protection, Future Generations³ compiled the book for primary and junior middle school students that includes awareness training materials in areas of the Three Rivers' Source.

The book features materials collected from interviews with and research on local community members, monks, and students and

¹ The Chang Tang Nature Reserve in the Tibet Autonomous Region is twice as large.

² The GEF was established on the eve of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit to address environmental problems. It has provided over \$17 billion in grants and mobilized an additional \$88 billion for 4,000+ projects in 170 countries (<https://www.thegef.org/about-us>, accessed 22 February 2018).

³ Started in 1992, Future Generations focuses on teaching and enabling a process for equitable community change integrating environmental conservation with development by supporting global community-driven social change (<http://www.future.org>, accessed 25 February 2018).

teachers of primary and junior middle schools in the Source of the Three Rivers area.¹ Certain sections of the book were piloted in primary and junior middle schools prior to the publication.

Each story is followed by a brief, related poem. Each part is followed by relevant exercises (role play, games). Facts and figures related to the story are also presented.

Certain stories are based on folktales and proverbs. The content shows heavy editing, for example, in the first story, Laba's settled home is portrayed as an indication of "improved living conditions," reflecting a policy-driven decision to favor sedentary settlements and urbanization over a pastoral lifestyle. This is at odds with the story of seasonal movement and the value of mobile homes in Story Seventeen. However, most stories are positive about self-sufficient pastoral life and eco-friendly culture.

The book begins with *Song of Three Rivers' Source* describing each river's origin and path. "A Household at the Source of Three Rivers" (Preface) introduces a Tibetan family of five whose nomadic forebears moved seasonally without a fixed point of residence. However, in recent years, Laba and his wife (Yangjin) and their three children have settled in a permanent residence. Zhaxi, the eldest child, attends a school near their home. Curious about nature, he wants to be a scientist. Cairin attends the same class as his brother, wants to be a scholar, and is interested in Tibetan drama. Meiduo, the youngest, likes flowers and crafts made by her mother. She dislikes randomly discarded garbage.

Jiangcuo is Zhaxi's head teacher and is also from a herding community. He takes his students to the grassland to experience nature and hopes that all his students will attend university and return home to work. The story also introduces three of Jiangcuo's colleagues who organize cultural activities and attend conservation training in cities.

Zhaxi's Uncle Jiacao studies at a university. During the summer and winter holidays, he returns to his home county to organize social service activities. Zhaxi's Uncle Suonan herds with

¹ Names of story contributors and dates of collection are not given.

Zhaxi's father and is familiar with various aspects of the grassland and mountains.

Zhaxi's classmate from Qumalai wants to build a school in his hometown so local children can attend school near their homes. Duoji, Laba's friend, is involved with environmental inspection, e.g., observing and taking notes on endangered wildlife and plants. Two of Laba's other friends have taken courses on environmental protection. Their hero is Suonan Dajie¹ who lost his life to the cause of protecting the Tibetan antelope.

PART 1: THE SOURCE OF THREE RIVERS - MY HOME

Story 1: Where Do We Live? The story begins with a poem of four verses consisting of seven lines each, with each line featuring seven characters. The poem briefly introduces the origin and flow of the three rivers. Multiple conversations at breakfast time, making butter tea, preparing for herding, and children getting ready for school, reveal the location of Laba's home. Once at school, Zhaxi and Cairin begin asking why they live near many snow mountains, rivers, and lakes. Teacher Jiangcuo answers their questions and introduces the value of the Three Rivers' Source, giving the names of wildlife such as antelope, snow leopard, wild ass, wild yak, black-necked crane, and brown bear.

Jiangcuo emphasizes the importance of being friendly with nature and protecting the Source of Three Rivers. Students plan to share what they have learned with their parents once they return home.

Two maps accompany this story depicting the location of the Three Rivers' Source.

Story 2: Place of Three Rivers' Source further details the Source of the Three Rivers. Three important mountain ranges at the source of each river are introduced - Tang Gula, Bayan Kala, and Kunlun. Glacial melting, springs, and small lakes and tributaries near these mountain ranges form each river. The path of each river is then described.

¹ Suonan Dajie (1954-1994), a former Vice Party Secretary of Zhiduo County, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province. He died while protecting Tibetan antelope from poachers in the Kekexili area of the Three Rivers' Source.

A map of rivers and lakes with mountain ranges accompanies the story.

Story 3: Our Sacred Mountains begins with Zhaxi's grandfather explaining that the Tibetan Plateau was once an ocean with thick forests along the coast and home to many antelope and deer. Various birds sang lovely songs. One day, five dragons appeared out of the ocean and scared the animals away. Next, a rainbow with five bands of color appeared and became five *dakinis*, female spirits with special powers. The dragons then surrendered and became protective spirits. Later, the five dakinis became five peaks of the Himalayan Mountains and protected the region.

Zhaxi falls asleep while listening to this story and dreams about how the Himalayas were formed. Later, Zhaxi and Cairin find a fossil of a sea creature.

The story mentions Mount Ani Maqing, Gaduo Juewu Mountain, and the Yellow River with regard to their ecological value and local beliefs as to how they protect both people and nature.

Story 4: Our Holy Lakes is set during the Tibetan New Year period and describes pilgrimage to holy lakes, highlighting the value of water. Believing water to be a source of life, the story emphasizes prohibiting such activities as throwing garbage, dead animals and other polluting articles into lakes, as well as not washing clothes at spring sources and not fishing at the source of the Yellow River. The second half of the story explains the water cycle.

Story 5: Magical Wetlands highlights wetlands. In addition to providing a habitat for black-necked cranes and other wildlife, wetlands store rainwater, prevent flooding, purify water, and provide water to streams and rivers during drought. Wetlands are compared to the human body. Putting garbage into the wetland sickens the ecosystem in the same way that eating junk food harms the human body.

Story 6: Unpredictable Weather focuses on extreme weather conditions at the Three Rivers' Source. The average altitude of the area is 3,500-4,800 meters above sea level. The average yearly temperature is below zero Celsius. Weak sheep are endangered by very cold weather. The dramatic weather changes have led local herders to develop a sophisticated ability to predict weather, e.g., birds busy building

shelters for winter means heavy snow and black clouds sandwiching red clouds means hail is imminent.

Herding is presented as an opportunity to learn, outside a regular classroom, about nature.

PART 2: SPIRITS SURROUNDING US

Story 7: Everything has a Life. Despite the harsh weather on the Tibetan Plateau, the grassland turns into a carpet of flowers and many other plants. Setting the story in a classroom, students create a writing assignment titled "Life." Their writings highlight that plants, flowers, wildlife, birds, water, land, and air have their own existence and are worthy of respect and protection. The class teacher emphasizes the importance of traditional values in protecting the environment and also the recently enforced laws protecting the Three Rivers' Source.

Story 8: Fascinating Caterpillar Fungus introduces the caterpillar fungus lifecycle. Giving the conditions of people collecting caterpillar fungus for commercial purpose, the story warns against destruction of the environment resulting from excessive digging of the fungus. It encourages moderate and environmentally-friendly digging that prevents desertification. Suggestions of an appropriate digging method are also provided.

Story 9: From a Seed to a Forest. The time and effort that seeds take to grow into trees and become forest highlights the value of forests. Forests along riverbanks in the Three Rivers' Source area are rich in biodiversity and, in general, forests are essential for the planet in absorbing carbon, maintaining soil quality, and so on. The danger of forest fires is emphasized.

Story 10: Tibetan Antelope: The Spirit of the Plateau highlights the iconic Tibetan antelope (chiru). From May to June, many pregnant antelopes migrate hundreds of kilometers from their grazing land to Kekexili to give birth. In late June, the mothers lead their babies back to the grazing area. With illustrations, the story introduces the antelope, its breeding and calving.

Poachers have focused on antelope, eager for the underfur (shahtoosh) that is eventually woven into illegal shawls that sell for

\$4,000-40,000USD each.¹ Famous antelope protector Suonan Dajie is admired by many pupils. Laba encourages his three children to protect the Three Rivers' Source when they grow up.

A brief introduction to wildlife protection law is also given.

Story 11: The Snow Leopard - King of the Snow Mountains begins with the picture of a snow leopard that Uncle Duoqi took in the wild. It was Zhaxi's first time to see a picture of a snow leopard. Fascinated, he asks many questions. Uncle Duoqi explains that the snow leopard cannot be easily seen and that it resides in hidden areas of deep mountains. As he explains that snow leopards eat blue sheep and argali, Zhaxi asks if it is possible to not let it eat those animals. Uncle Duoqi then gives details of how the ecosystem is balanced by what the animals eat for survival. The point is made that snow leopards are very rare and that they are as precious as pandas.

Story 12: Black-Necked Crane-Auspicious Bird. The Black-Necked Crane is presented via both a story and illustrations. Considered a sacred and auspicious bird, it features in *thangka* paintings and in the Gesar Epic. Birds lay one or two eggs in May that require thirty-one to thirty-three days to hatch.

PART 3: NATURE AND US

Story 13: The Web of Life introduces the ecosystem, e.g., sunlight, plants, carbon, yak dung; and animals: rodents, pikas, rabbits, wolves, snakes, vultures, and fox. A key takeaway is the ecological value of plants and animals and their interconnectedness.

Story 14: Brown Bears that Enter Homes describes how Laba and his friend, Duoqi, drive to a remote home where they measure the size of fences that are needed to protect the family from brown bears. A brown bear recently broke into the home and ate and messed up the family's stored food supply. The story explains that locals in the area coexist peacefully with wildlife as epitomized in the saying "Land is divided into six pieces, of which one is for wildlife." Recognizing that

¹ Three to five antelope die for each shawl (<http://bit.ly/2p4Op65/>, accessed 13 March 2018).

human encounters with brown bears in the home can be life-threatening, Duoji explains to the family how to protect themselves from such incidents by sharing some well-illustrated brochures. He also gives details of subsidies provided by the local government for property loss resulting from such encounters.

Story 15: Balance in Nature emphasizes how nature treats all beings on earth fairly, which is nowhere more evident than at the Three Rivers' Source. The Plateau's rare and diverse creatures have coexisted for a long time in their own way. The national nature reserve provides even more protection to the environment. However, people often extract natural resources and harm nature. Zhaxi and Cairin are shocked when they encounter a river that has been deeply excavated that now has no fish. They report the situation of illegal digging and mining to the Environmental Protection Department.

In Story 16: A New Challenge for the Plateau - Garbage. Zhaxi and Cairin learn about types of local garbage that are on the increase such as plastic bags and bottles, disposable chopsticks and cups, expired batteries, and construction waste. This garbage negatively impacts lakes, rivers, and animals that eat it. Given the limited opportunities for disposing of garbage, the teacher suggests that the students reduce garbage production by not using disposable chopsticks and limiting purchases of bottled water and junk food. Drawings and remarks on methods of recycling and categorizing garbage are included.

Story 17: The Black Yak-hair Tent - a Mobile Home is set during a time when Laba's family annually moved between four pastures. The focus is on nomads' wise use of grassland for their livestock at appropriate times. Rotating usage of grassland protects nature as well as efficiently utilizing ecological resources.

Story 18: Lifeguarding Spirit - the Yak highlights locals' dependence on yaks for a self-sufficient livelihood. Providing transportation, milk, cheese, yogurt, meat, skin, wool, and black tent fabric, Laba encourages his children to appreciate what yaks offer, which makes their life possible on the Plateau.

In Story 19: One Night at a Museum, Zhaxi and his classmates visit the Tibetan Folk Art Museum where various traditional household items are on display, including baskets, blankets, bags for

tea made of animal skins, wooden bowls, yak hair yarn, flint, and natural materials used to paint thangka. The visit brings new appreciation of the value of these environmentally-friendly, reusable items.

The list of contributors involved in the compilation of this book suggests that much of the book was written and edited by non-Tibetan speakers, but reviewed by a Tibetan scholar from the China Tibetology Research Center. Although few children or adults in the Three Rivers Source Region can read Tibetan, many monks there do. Furthermore, in other Tibetan areas, Tibetan literacy is more common. A Tibetan-language version would be very useful and it is not clear to this reviewer why a bilingual version was not published in one volume.

In sum, *Home at The Source of Three Rivers* is a useful addition to the few readings related to conservation for primary and junior middle school students in the region. The language is appropriate for the intended audience. Illustrations with more detail would be helpful. The book would have also greater impact if it were open access and easily downloadable, and if an audio version were available in the local Tibetan dialect as well as Chinese so children could share with their younger siblings and illiterate relatives.

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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Ani Maqing 阿尼玛卿, a myes rma chen ཨ་མེས་རྣ་ཆེན།
 Bayan Kala 巴颜喀拉, a chen gangs ri ཨ་ཆེན་གངས་རི།
 Cairin 才仁, tshe ring ཆེ་རིང་།
 Chang Tang, Qiangtang 羌塘, byang thang བྱང་ཐང་།
 Duoji 多吉, rdo rje རྡོ་རྗེ།
 Gaduo Juewu 朵朵觉悟, sga stod jo bo སྐ་སྣོད་ཇོ་བོ།
 Gesar 格萨尔, ge sar གེ་སར།
 Jiangcuo 江措, rgya mtsho རྒྱ་མཚོ།
 Kekexili 可可西里, a chen gangs rgyab ཨ་ཆེན་གངས་རྒྱལ།
 Kunlun 昆仑, khu nu ལུ་ནུ།
 Laba 拉巴, lhag pa ལྷག་པ།
 Lancang 澜沧, rdza chu རྩ་ཆུ།
 Meiduo 梅朵, me tog མེ་ཏོག།
 Niang Jijia 娘吉加, snying lcags rgyal སྙིང་ལུགས་རྒྱལ།
 Nyangchakja, snying lcags rgyal སྙིང་ལུགས་རྒྱལ།
 Qinghai 青海, mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན།
 Qumalai 曲麻莱, chu dmar leb ཆུ་དམར་ལེབ།
 Renqing 仁青, rin chen རིན་ཆེན།
 Suonan 索南, bsod nams བསོད་ནམས།
 Suonan Dajie 索南达杰, bsod nams dar rgyas བསོད་ནམས་དར་རྒྱས།
 Tang Gula 唐古拉, gdang la གང་ད་ལ།
 thangka, thang kha ཐང་ཀ།
 Yangjin 央金, g.yang can གཡང་ཅན།
 Yangtze, Changjiang 长江, 'bri chu འབྲི་ཆུ།
 Yushu 玉树, yul shul ཡུ་ཤུ།
 Zhaxi 扎西, bkra shis བརྒ་ཤིས།
 Zhiduo 治多, 'bri stod འབྲི་སྣོད།